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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000015

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR AF/S

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SUBJECT: A PLOT TO KILL MALAWI'S PRESIDENT?

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1. (SBU) Three United Democratic Front officials were charged with treason on Wednesday for carrying guns to a meeting with President Bingu wa Mutharika. The Attorney General said authorities had information that some politicians had plotted to kill the president on January 2, 2004. By Thursday afternoon, reports indicated that charges had been dropped against the men. President Mutharika, however, held a press conference this afternoon, in which, according to journalists present, he charged that the plot was real, that it was organized by the UDF, and that former President Muluzi had full knowledge of it. The charges against Muluzi were not carried in the first broadcast reports carried on Government radio. Mutharika is said to be temporarily closing the National Intelligence Bureau in response to poor intelligence on the incident. The press conference has not yet been broadcast. The closure of NIB is partly motivated by the widely held perception that the NIB is loyal principally to former President Muluzi, its creator.

2. (U) The three officials, Deputy Transport Minister Roy Commsy, former Cabinet Minister Harry Thomson and Member of Parliament Alfred Mwechumu, were on their way to a reconciliation meeting between the President and senior UDF officials aligned with former President Bakili Muluzi. After the arrests on gun charges, the police released the three on bail, then re-arrested them for treason several hours later. Two of the men were remanded into custody and later released when the charges were dropped, while one of the men has been admitted to a local hospital for a diabetic condition. The UDF explained that the guns were licensed and that the politicians routinely carried them as a matter of personal security. The party's spokesman confirmed reports that the UDF is seriously reconsidering its relationship with the President and the government. For his part, Mutharika has reportedly announced that he will not press treason charges against the three.

3. (SBU) COMMENT: Whether or not there was actually a plot to assassinate the President, and whether or not treason was actually committed, the events of the past several days are another indication that the rift between Mutharika and Muluzi is worsening. Recent incidents of physical intimidation, mainly by Muluzi loyalists (to be reported septel), are an indication at least that passions are running high. Muluzi loyalists appear not to have the political support to threaten the Government seriously, and Mutharika has been content up to now to deal with them one by one, mostly through his anti-corruption campaign. But the increasing intensity of the disagreements between the two sides appears to be peaking, with Mutharika finally charging UDF in public. Whether this will result in criminal charges, or whether Muluzi will respond with something still more dramatic, remains to be seen. In any case, it is clear that the old guard will not go quietly.

GILMOUR